Picking up the Pieces: Practical & Emotional Support for Survivors

HINES VA SUICIDE PREVENTION COORDINATORS
MARIANN BLACCONIERE, LCSW
AMANDA KALINS, LCSW
IRIS TRAVIS, LCSW

Presentation Highlights

- How death by suicide is different
- Impact on Parents
- Impact on Spouses
- Impact on Children
- Practical Support for Families

Who is a Survivor of Suicide?

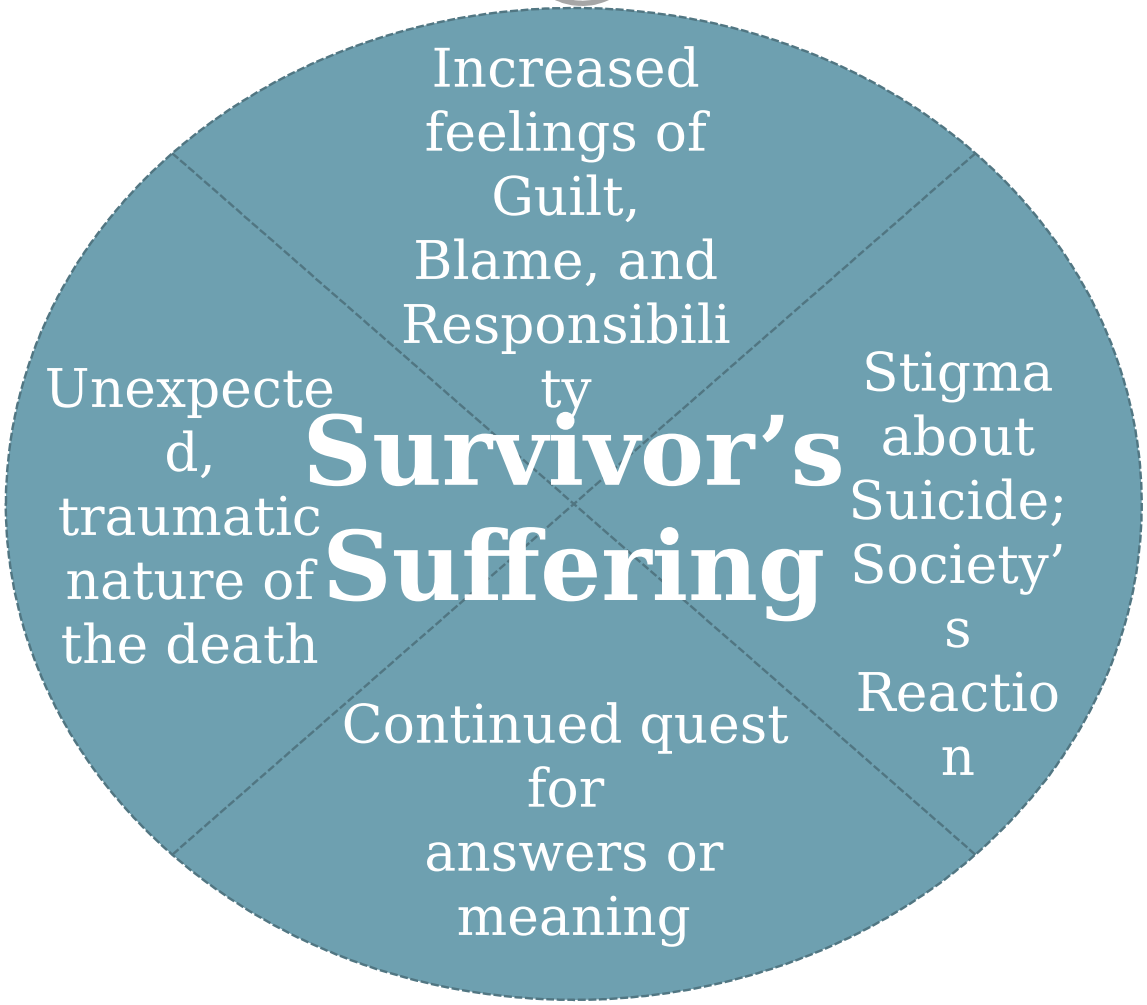
A survivor of suicide is a family member or friend of a person who died by suicide.

Survivors of suicide represent *"the largest mental health casualties related to suicide"*

Edwin Shneidman, PhD, AAS Founding President

For every suicide, there are at least 6 survivors

Death by Suicide is Different


Increased feelings of Guilt, Blame, and Responsibility
Unexpected, traumatic nature of the death
Survivor's Suffering
Stigma about Suicide; Society's Reaction
Continued quest for answers or meaning

Death by Suicide is Different

Shock
Anger
Relief
Guilt
Shame
Embarrassment
Rejection
Self-Blame
Confusion

Why
Abandonment
Disbelief
Numbness
Anxiety
Depression
Pain
Hopelessness
Stress

Impact of the Post-Suicide Investigation

How do these components impact the natural grief process?

Judicial Atmosphere

Media Attention/Coverage

Invasion of Privacy

Evidence collection

Exposure to graphic evidence

Survivors of Suicide: Parents

- **Common Reactions of Parents & Complicated Grief as a Parent**

No parent should ever have to bury their child

- **Society's Reaction to Survivor Parents**

Common Reactions & Complicated Grief

- Grieving who their child was and who they hoped they would be
- Remorse over lost opportunities
- Anger at the person who took their own life
- Guilt over failed responsibilities, real or imagined
  - Did I miss the signs?
  - Did I not love them enough?
  - Am I a bad parent?
- Isolation caused by a sense of self-imposed shame
- Loneliness when others keep their distance
- Relief
- Anger toward those perceived to have contributed to the suicide
- Awkwardness when others don't know how to respond
- Shock associated with facing the traumatic and sometimes unexpected nature of the death
- Difficulty accepting the death was by suicide
- Fear that powerful grief reactions may not be normal
- Difficulty making sense of the suicide

Survivors of Suicide: Parents

Society can play a major role in Parents' Grieving

- We frown on suicide & often look at the parents as possessing poor parenting skills
- We blame mental illness
- We scrutinize any family history of questionable or concerning behavior

Survivors of Suicide: Parents

Role of 1st Responders

- What we do at Hines VA
- Who is the best on your team?
- Develop a protocol & process
- Be armed with Resources, Referrals, Options
- Know what to expect with your specific survivor population

Think short-term & long-term assistance

Survivors of Suicide: Parents

Barriers & Restrictions

- Time limited
- Balance of addressing immediate issues vs projected long term issues
  - Do you tackle burial questions or complicated grief?
- Access to parents
- How long do you stay connected to provide support to parents of a Vet?

Postvention Tips for Survivor Parents

- Give yourself time to come to terms with your loss
- Try not to deny your feelings
- Grief is a normal reaction – even when your feelings seems too intense to be normal
- Work through your feelings – alone & with others
- Look for warning signs of depression or suicidal thoughts in yourself & others
- If someone seems awkward or don't know what to say – tell them what you need
- Accept that not everyone will be able to give the type of support you need
- Anticipate important events – birthdays, holidays, anniversaries
- Seek professional grief counseling
- Consider joining a support group

Survivors of Suicide: Parents

The best help comes from attending a support group for survivors of suicide where they can openly share their own story…

- Support Groups
- Psychoeducational Services
- Social Networking
- Community Events

- State-by-state directory of 500+ suicide survivor support groups www.afsp.org

Resources for Suicide Survivor Parents

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
www.afsp.org

American Association of Suicidology
www.suicidology.org

Survivors of Suicide
www.survivorsofsuicide.com

SAVE: Suicide Awareness Voices of Education
www.save.org

Survivor Outreach Services
www.MYARMYOneSource.com – Click on Family Programs & Services

My Personal Recommendations

- ***No Time To Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One***
  Carla Fine

- ***My Son…My Son: A Guide to Healing After Death, Loss, or Suicide***
  Iris Bolton & Curtis Mitchell

- ***When Bad Things Happen to Good People***
  Harold S. Kushner

- ***Glad No Matter What: Transforming Loss and Change into Gift and Opportunity***
  SARK

- ***If I should die, I should live***
  Joanne Marxhausen

Survivors of Suicide: Spouses

IRIS TRAVIS, LCSW
SUICIDE PREVENTION COORDINATOR
HINES VA HOSPITAL

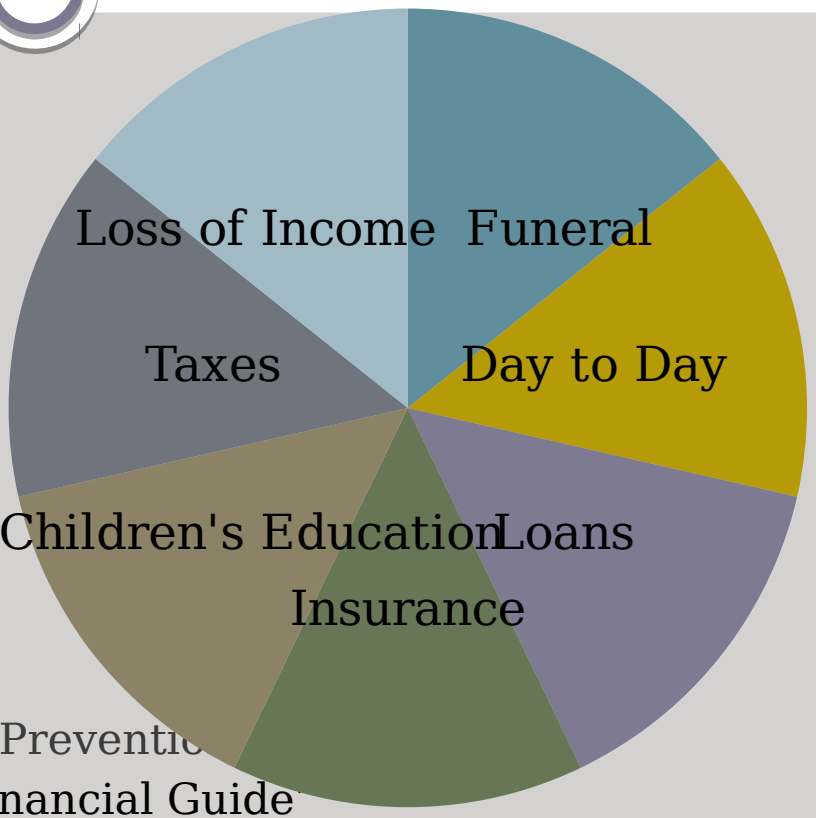
Spousal Bereavement: Natural Death vs. Death by Suicide

- Complicated Grief
- Reactions of Survivors
- Effects on the Family System
- Society’s Reaction

Common Reactions

- Relief
- Disbelief/ Shock
- Anger
- Guilt
- Shame
- Intense yearning for the deceased
- Behavioral
  - sleep and appetite disturbances, increased smoking or alcohol consumption, crying spells, loss of intimacy, changes in sex life
- Physical
  - Fatigue, circulatory or digestive issues, ulcers, chest discomfort, migraine headaches
- Environmental changes
  - Relocating
- Psychiatric
  - Depression, Anxiety, Trauma symptoms

Financial Burden



- Resources
  - American Foundation for Suicide Preventic
    - “Surviving a Suicide Loss: A Financial Guide
  - Survivor Outreach Services
    - Financial Counselors

Society’s Reaction

- Stigma
- Blame
- Avoidance

Coping

- Search for answers:
  - Why the suicide occurred?
  - What role did I play in the suicide?
  - Could it have been prevented?
  - Why did he/she leave me alone?
- Denial
- Social supports
- Environmental changes

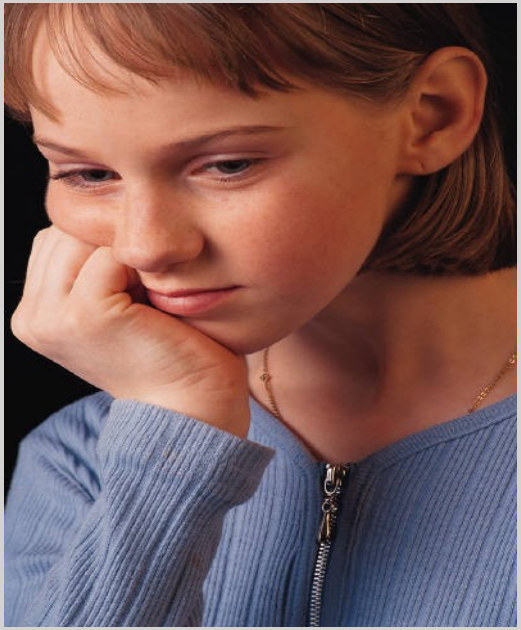
Resources

- Survivor Support Groups
- Online Resources & Support Groups
  - www.afsp.org
  - http://www.survivorsofsuicide.com/
  - www.spanusa.org
- Individual therapy/ Family therapy
- Survivor Outreach Services
- Books
- Accessibility of resources
- Need for first responders to have knowledge of information: clergy, funeral directors, ER staff, primary care providers

References

- Calhoun, L., Selby, J., & Selby, L. (1982). The Psychological Aftermath of Suicide: An analysis of current evidence. *Clinical Psychology Review,* 2, 409-420.
- Cerel, J., et al. (2009). A call for research: The need to better understand the impact of support groups for suicide survivors. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior,* 39, 269-281.
- Cvinar, J. (2005). Do suicide survivors suffer social stigma: A review of the literature. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care,* 41, 14-21.
- De Groot, M., De Keijser, J. & Neeleman, J. (2006). Grief Shortly After Suicide and Natural Death: A Comparative Study Among Spouses and First-Degree Relatives. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior,* 36, 418-431.
- McMenamy, J., Jordan, J., & Mitchell, A. (2008). What do suicide survivors tell us they need? Results of a pilot study. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior,* 38, 375-389.
- Van Dongen, C. (1990). Agonizing questions: Experiences of survivors of suicide victims. *Nursing Research*, 39, 224-229.

Helping Children Cope



Mariann Blacconiere, LCSW
Suicide Prevention Coordinator Hines VA
Lead VISN 12

When death strikes the family

When a death happens in a family and the deceased was a parent, or someone who was close to a child, talking to the child about the death may be one of the most difficult tasks you face. You can't ignore their needs. Even very young children will be aware of the death of someone in their lives, and they need an opportunity to ask [illegible] to get truthful answers.

Fear of the Unknown

The National Institute for Mental Health says, "By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know. Often children have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk does not solve all problems, but without talk we are even more limited in our abi lp."

Cause of death??

Explaining death to a child is very difficult under any circumstances but perhaps the most difficult in the case of suicide.

Some adults are hesitant to tell children that someone has died from suicide because they want to protect children from painful feelings. This is a very understandable concern because of the stigma associated with suicide in ou

Little Pictures have BIG ears and people can have BIG mouths

Keep in mind that when adults hide the truth in an effort to protect children, the children often see and hear information from other sources, such as a clipping from the newspaper, or an overheard conversation, from a neighbor, a relative, or another child. One way to have better control over information is to tell children the truth yourself.

Honesty is the Best Policy

The truth can be talked about in ways that are open and honest and still protect the child. Often what a child perceives actually may be scarier for them than the truth itself. On the other hand, it is a good idea to refrain from being too graphic.

If you are open and honest with them, you are teaching them that they can be the same with you. As a result, they will be prepared when others talk about what happe[illegible] you will develop a more trusting r[illegible]hip.

Knowing the truth

Talking about suicide will not increase the risk that others will go on to take their own lives. In fact, like a death from any other serious illness, suicide is now part of the family's health history. Knowing the truth about mental illness and suicide enables all surviving family members to be appropriately vigilant about their own health going forward, and take preventive steps.

Where to begin?

Find a place where you can talk quietly and without interruption. Include another adult if the child (or you) may be comforted by their presence. You will want to adjust what you say depending on the age of the child (if you have to talk to several children of different ages at once, start with language appropriate to the youngest).

Children under 3

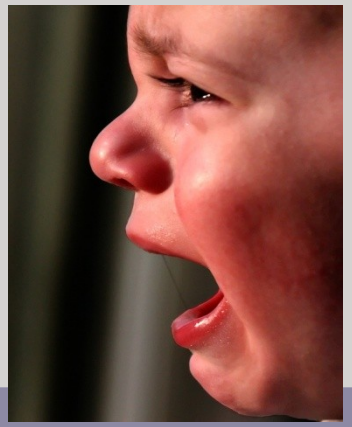
Very young children (3 and under), don't understand the meaning or permanence of death, and primarily need comforting and physical affection. If asked where Mommy is, respond simply, *"Mommy has died and I am sad. I'm here and I'm going to take care of you."*

3 to 6

With children ages 3 to 6, you may want to start by explaining about death in general such as *“Dead means that a person body stops working forever and it can’t be fixed. When someone is dead, they are dead forever.”*

Fault and Fear

Children this age will tend to be especially focused on what the death means to them (is it my fault? who will take care of me and read me stories? will my daddy die, too? will I die?). Reassure them by addressing their (often unexpressed) concerns that they will continue to be loved and cared for.



6 to 11

Children may start to ask more questions about the death at this age. They are starting school and their friends may be asking about the lost parent. They may not ask how the death occurred, but if they do, you can start by simply saying, *“Daddy died by suicide, which means he killed himself.”* The rest of the conversation will depend on her response to that statement. It’s very possible that she may not have much to say and even change the subject. In general, young children will be more focused on the loss and what it means for them, rather than on the cause of death.

Older Children

Older children may be more aware of the circumstances surrounding the death but may be less open about sharing their feelings. They may also feel more responsible than young children and search harder for answers.

Whatever the age of the child, do your best to use simple, truthful language.

- *She died by suicide. Suicide means she killed herself.*
- *He had a very serious illness in his brain. The illness is called depression. It's very different from just having a bad day.*
- *The illness in his brain caused him . . .. to feel very confused, . . . to feel hopeless, . . . to make very bad decisions, . . . to stop taking his medication,. . . to end his life*
- *He didn't know how to get help/see any other way to stop the pain.*
- *Suicide is complicated – we'll never know exactly what went through her mind or what she was feeling – but I do know she must have been in terrible pain.*

Basics to remember when talking to children about someone special who has died from suicide:

- They want to know that their feelings are okay no matter what they are.
- They want to feel loved and valued above all else.
- They want to feel protected and that no one else is leaving them or will die right now.
- They want to know that nothing they did, said, or thought caused this to happen.

Key Steps on Understanding

Children grieve differently than adults. You may find that they want to have the several conversation asking additional questions over a period of time.

Be prepared to talk about the suicide multiple times during the next days and weeks, and indeed throughout the child's life. You can open the door to this continuing dialogue by saying, *"You may choose to talk with me now or later about what you are feeling, and if you want to ask more questions, I will be available to you. It may be hard to figure out what you need right now, but we will figure this out together."*

Children’s Grief Process

Children experience the emotions of grief like adults but have limited ability expressing their feelings resulting in acting out behaviors. We need to be aware of these behaviors so we can help address the children's emotional needs.

Grief

- Shock Denial Pain
- Guilt Anger Shame
- Despair Disbelief Hopelessness
- Stress Sadness Numbness
- Rejection Loneliness Abandonment
- Confusion Self-blame Anxiety
- Helplessness Depression

Abandonment

- **Regression**

-children may behave as they did at a younger age.

-toilet training

-difficulty with separation

-night lights

-sleeping alone

-acting less socially mature

-withdrawing or isolating from peers

Behaviors to expect

ANGER

-demanding

-refuse to share

-pick fights

-Causing problems in school

-Acting out in a dangerous manner (driving)

-experiment with drugs or alcohol or cigarettes

-delinquency

-sexual activity

Anger

Children may express anger about the death. They may focus on someone they feel is to blame. They may feel angry at God. They may feel angry at the person who died for leaving them. Family members sometimes become the focus of this anger.

Expressing feelings creatively

Children may express their feelings in ways other than talking.

- Use of play

-creative activities such as drawing

- writing to express their grief

Often, they come to a better understanding of grief through play and creativity.

These expressions can give you clues about what children are thinking, but be careful not to jump to conclusions. For example, very happy drawings after a traumatic death might give adults the idea that a child is not affected by the death when, in fact, this is more likely a sign that the child is not yet ready to deal with the grieving process.

Helping a Child Cope

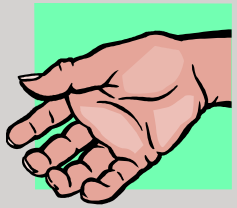
- Help the child grieve by allowing them to focus on the memories of their loved one and the special times shared.
- Let the child them to be able to say “Goodbye” and express it anyway they feel comfortable.
- Allow the child my choose or not choose to share their goodbye with others. Remember they had NO SAY in the sudden death of their family member so they should be allowed to have control in their final goodbye.

Saying Goodbye

- Write a letter
- Draw a picture
- Make a picture collage
- Make a video
- Write a poem
- Create a memory box
- Compose a song

Reaching Out

Professional and Group Resources for support



- Your children's teacher or school counseling services
- A pediatrician or other health care provider
- Bereavement support groups for families and children
- Community-based mental health services
- Special camp programs for children who have had a family member die
- Your primary health care provider
- A community-based bereavement program or hospice service
- Counseling services
- A faith group
- Trustworthy friends and family members
- Web-based support services for people in bereavement *Dougy Center* The National Center for Grieving Children and Families .Support for children, teens, young adults and families grieving a death. http://www.dougy.org/www.sesameworkshop.org/grief .
- Sesame Street Grief workbook: www.sesameworkshop.org/grief .

Recommended Books

Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Helping Children with Complicated Grief- Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence and Abuse

Linda Goldman

Before their Time: Adult Children's Experience of Parental Suicide

Mary and Maureen Stimming

Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One

Ann Smolin, CWS and John Guinan, PD.D.

Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven: Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling

Michelle Linn-Gust, M.S.

Grief Therapy

Karen Katafiasz

Quick Guide Series on Survival Benefits for Veterans and Military Families

PRACTICAL HELP FOR SURVIVORS

NUTS AND BOLTS TO HELP SURVIVE AFTER A TRAGEDY

VA Burial Allowances

Veterans

Department of Veterans Affairs 1-800-827-1000
RESOURCE THE OFFICE OF DECEDENT AFFAIR

Two Types of Burial Allowar

1-Burial and funeral expense allowance

2-Plot or interment allowance

Service related death up $2,000 towards expenses and if they are buried in VA cemetery some or all cost of transportation of deceased

Non-Service-Related Death up to $300 towards funeral expenses and a $300 plot allowance. If vet died under the care of VA contacted nursing home or hospital some or all cost of transportation of the body

NUTS AND BOLTS

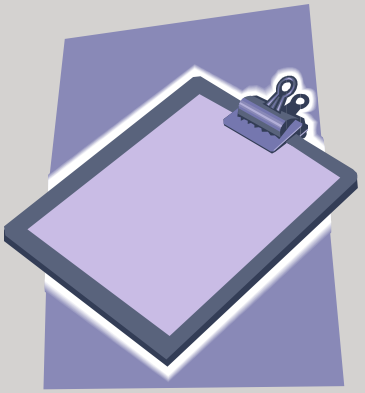
TOOLS NEEDED

FINDING FORMS YOU WILL NEED

- http://www.va.gov/vaforms
- VA-530 Application for burial benefi
- VA Form 21-2008 Flag Request
- www.militaryfuneralhonors.osd.mil
- Military Funeral Honors
- 1-800-697-6947 Headstone/Grave Marker Program
- 1-800-669-8477 Government Life Insurance Info
- 1-800-900-6415 National Cemetery Scheduling Office

Burial in a VA National Cemetery

- This of things family will need to provide:
  - Full name and Military Rank
  - Branch of Service
  - Social Security Number
  - VA Claim Number (if applicable)
  - Date and Place of Birth
  - Date of Retirement of Separation from Service
  - Copy of separation papers DD214
  - http://www.archives.gov/verterans/evetrecs
    Or Standard SF 180 form



ACTIVE DUTY RESOURCES

Casualty Assistance Officers

The Military Services have different titles for their casualty assistance officers:

- **Army Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO)**
- **Marine Corps Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CA**
- **Navy Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CACO)**
- **Air Force Casualty Assistance Representative (CAR**
- **Coast Guard Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CAC**

SURVIVORS OUTREACH SERVICES

- https://www.myarmyonesource.com/familyprogramsandservices/familyprograms/survivoroutreachservice
- **Active Duty**: TAPS *Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors*- for survivors of someone who dies while in military service. http://www.taps.org/
- Military OneSource http://www.militaryonesource.com

Possible Survivors Benefits

- **Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)** -- DIC is a tax-free benefit for the surviving spouse and dependent children .

  VA Form 21-534a, Application for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation by a Surviving Spouse or Child
- **Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance (DEA)** -- Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance provides payment of a monthly education or training allowance to the spouse and children of a veteran who died of a service-connected disability. **VA Form 22-5490**
- **To apply for Work Study Employment: VA Form 22-8691**
- **Home Loan Guaranty** -- The surviving spouse of a veteran who died in service or as the result of a service-connected disability may be eligible for a guaranteed loan from a private lender. The loan may be used to purchase, construct or improve a home; to purchase a manufactured home and/or lot; or to refinance existing mortgages or other liens of record on a dwelling owned and occupied by the surviving spouse as his or her home. There is no time limit to use this benefit. **VA Form 26-1817**

Documents Needed to Apply for Benefits

LIST OF IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

- **DD Form 1300 “Report of Casualty” (provided by your Service Casualty Office)**
- **DD Form 2064 “Certificate of Death (Overseas)”**
- **civilian death certificates (can be purchased through funeral home; 12 copies recommended)**
- **marriage certificate**
- **divorce decree**
- **immigration documents**
- **naturalization papers**
- **adoption and or custody documents**
- **social security number/card for all family members**
- **wills and deeds of trust**
- **insurance policies (life, home, vehicles, etc.)**
- **income tax records (past three years)**
- **documents referring to bank accounts, loans, securities, etc.**
- **references to safe deposit boxes**
- **references to out standing debt**

List of Helpful Organizations

There are many veterans service organizations that offer assistance as well as other Federal and private organizations. For information on these organizations, refer to your telephone directory, contact your VA regional office, or visit the VA web site. Here is a list of the contacts available:

- Direct Deposit (VA only) (877) 838-2778
- VA Education Benefits (800) 442-4551
- Service Member's Group Life Insurance(800) 419-1473
- Social Security Administration(800) 772-1213
- Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) (800) 321-1080
- TRICARE www.tricare.osd.mil (800) 874-2273
- Office of Personnel Management (OPM) www.OPM.gov (800) 767-6738
- Department of Veterans Affairs 1-800-827-1000
- Quick Guide Series on Survival Benefits for Veterans and Military Families

Questions??

THANK YOU